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Opening extract from

Space Cowboy

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Chapter One

Travis McClure turned his tired horse west, away from camp, away from cool water and soft sleeping bags, away from everything he so desperately wanted. He glanced at the sky, greenish gold, not blue like the skies back home on Earth, streaked with pale clouds that twisted and streamed in the unending wind. Two suns hung low, bloated red Alpha and tiny Beta, so white it hurt his eyes. Twin suns that burned and bleached and stole the spit from your mouth if you let them. Travis tugged his hat down, the brim floppy and torn, and nudged his horse in the ribs.

"Let's go, Deuce."

Deuce snorted his displeasure but broke into a laggardly trot, hooves smacking the rust red trail. The narrow path was packed tight by the scattered bands of cattle and wild sheep the terraformers had released decades ago, an attempt to jump-start millions of years of evolution and create a living planet in a galactic heartbeat. Someday, long after Travis and his family had gone home, colonists would arrive with their factories and schools, cities and farms. But for now, only the scattered camps of geologists and stockmen, too desperate or too stubborn to leave, covered the awakening world. Aletha Three was a harsh planet, desolate and arid. Someday, the Company claimed, it would be a paradise of green meadows and shadowed forests. Someday, but not today. And not tomorrow, and not for as long as Travis could imagine being stuck here.

"Just one more season," Dad would promise. "One more season, two at the most, and we'll have saved enough money to pay off the loans on the ranch. Then we'll go home." Travis sighed. He was starting to think his dad's promises were as empty as the wind. He'd been eleven when they landed. Now he was sixteen. Five years chasing cattle from pasture to pasture, five years wondering if he would ever see Earth again.

The trail grew steeper as it climbed into the foothills. Travis urged his tired horse forward as they slipped around boulders big as starship hangers. Scraggly

patches of sagebrush and juniper poked out of the dry soil. The climatologists at base camp had been promising rain for weeks, but so far, not a drop had fallen. No surprise, Travis thought sourly. Like everything else on Aletha, nothing quite followed anyone's carefully laid out plans. Weather satellites failed, burned up by the harsh radiation that streamed around the planet. On the surface, radios became useless for days at a time after solar flares or during the sandstorms that swept in from the deserts to pummel the grasslands. Even simple machines like vid-games and clocks tended to die early in the harsh environment. He glanced at his wristwatch, not certain if it was keeping time correctly. His legs and stomach certainly felt like it was getting close to suppertime.

As if he had read his mind, Deuce stopped, refusing to go forward, and stood flicking his ears back and forth. Travis frowned and glanced down at the trail in front of him. He had been following the stray cattle all afternoon, hoping every time he topped a rise or turned a corner he would run headlong into them. So far, though, he was always one jump behind. The tracks were fresh, a few hours old at most, long scuff marks trailing where their toes had dragged. The little herd had been moving fast. So had something else. An odd foot print covered the cow tracks, the impression perfect in the soft red dust.

"Whoa, Deuce." He swallowed, his mouth so dry his voice cracked. "This isn't right."

Travis stepped out of the saddle and crouched beside the strange tracks. Three toes, spread wide like a hawk on the grab. He'd seen tracks like these the year before and shuddered at the memory. Three yearlings ripped apart, shattered bones covering the blood speckled ground. He had been riding alone when he had heard the scream, a keening wail of rage and animal triumph. No one had believed him then. They said it was a pack of coyotes or feral cats. But Travis knew better. He patted Deuce then fished his radio out of the saddlebag.

"Dad? Are you on the net?"

A burst of static preceded Jim McClure's reply. "Where're you at, Trav?"

"About five klicks west of Needle Point." Travis paused, the little transmitter next to his mouth. He didn't want to say what he had to, especially over an open frequency. "Dad, do you remember those tracks I told you about last year? The ones around those dead heifers?"

"Yeah, I remember." Even across the distance it was clear his father still doubted the story.

"I think..." Travis took a deep breath. Far away, too distant to be clear, a scream echoed down the canyon walls. "I think whatever made them is back."

*

Night fell as Travis reached camp. True night, not the long twilight of twin sunsets, the darkness menacing and grim. Glad to be back, he unsaddled Deuce and turned him loose in the corral. The horse rolled gratefully in the dust. Fewer tents remained tonight, the camp preparing to move again, gypsies on an endless trek. The geologists and hydrologists had pulled stakes last week. Soon, they would do the same. The grass here was finished, the water holes nearly dry. Time to drive the herds to greener pastures.

On Earth, animals like bison and wild horses had once covered the grasslands, their hooves churning the barren soil like a million tiny ploughs, spreading seed as they moved. Here, the scattered herds of hardy, more manageable cattle served the same purpose. Eventually, so the terraformers insisted, the animals would number in the millions and establish natural migration patterns as integral to the environment as rain. They were as much a part of the plan to bring Aletha to life as the weather satellites and water collectors scattered around the planet.

Travis wondered what other creatures the plan included.

He saw his dad near the cook-tent and hurried toward him. Most of the other herders had long since returned. One of them, a dark-haired man in his early twenties loitering outside the repair trailer, saw him and

broke away from the knot of people waiting for supper. Travis grimaced. Bart Caddy was definitely not someone he wanted to see right now.

"Hey, Trav. Heard you found them tracks again." Caddy's voice was loud and piercing, about as musical as an untuned thruster pack. "They looked like bird feet you say?"

"Yeah." Travis chewed on his lower lip. News had obviously spread fast. Out the corner of his eye he saw Caddy's friends approach, ringing him like a pack of feral dogs. "They look like overgrown bird tracks."

"Well, do you suppose whatever made 'em looked like this?" Howling at his own joke, Caddy raised a crude, hand-drawn picture of an enormous chicken, big as a jump shuttle, a struggling cow clutched in its beak. Travis blushed, but before he could reply, his father pushed through the little crowd. He cleared his throat, his voice dusty as his cracked leather chaps.

"Don't you all have chores to do, or should I find you some?"

"No, sir." Caddy stuffed the picture inside his tight fitting jacket, and left, followed by his pack of friends.

Travis looked away, embarrassed that he needed to be rescued, but grateful for it all the same. He followed his father toward their tent, a squat blue dome glowing with warmth and the promise of sleep. Travis paused outside the door-flap.

"I really did see those tracks."

"I'm sure you saw something." His father pushed the flap up and ducked inside. The stiff fabric rustled behind him. Travis stood outside a moment and stared at the sky. He felt like a scolded child. Someone coughed. Startled, he spun around. A stocky man in an expensive parka waited behind him. Allen Tempke, the Company foreman, the man who signed the checks. The man who hired and fired. The boss.

"You saw something today, Travis?"

"I..." Travis was sweating despite the chill wind. "I think so."

"If someone has introduced a rogue predator into this environment, the Company needs to know about it. I don't suppose you recovered any physical evidence? You know, hair or droppings? Something we could test for DNA."

"No, sir." Travis didn't mention the scream he had heard. "All I saw were the tracks."

"That's unfortunate." A faint smile creased Tempke's lips. "I'm sure the bonus for that sort of information would be substantial." He nodded a goodbye, then left.

Travis watched him go, too stunned to speak, and not at all happy with the extra attention. Around him the night-wind moaned low. Still shaken by the strange turn the day had taken, he lifted the tent flap and slipped inside.

Chapter Two

He was up before daybreak. Travis tip-toed past his snoring parents, scribbled a quick note for them and left it beside his homework. A sturdy digi-cam hung by the wrist strap from one of the tent poles. He took it down and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. Across the domed tent, on top of a plastic foot-locker, rested a battered carbine. Travis stared at the rifle, so old it was almost a relic, and wished he could take it along, but as quickly abandoned the idea. Dad didn't lose his temper often, but when he did it was epic, and borrowing his gun without his permission was pushing his luck light-years too far. Instead, he grabbed a handful of ration bars and his

canteen and started toward the door. As an afterthought, he snatched his tracker off the table and clipped it beside his knife sheath, just in case they needed to find him. He was anxious to pick up the trail of the strange animal before the wind destroyed the tracks.

Thoughts of the weird animal – and the bonus – spun in his brain. He'd waited a year to prove he wasn't just some kid with a run away imagination, and refused to let the chance slip this time. As quietly as he could, he zipped his jacket tighter and stepped outside.

The wind was strong and bristled with static electricity. A storm was gathering, a change already in the chill air. Travis shivered as he hurried to the corral. No one else in camp had stirred out yet, nothing moving except for the little sentry 'bot crawling its rounds on the outskirts of the encampment, and the anemometer cups whirling above the meteorologists station. He took a short-cut through the uneven collection of tents and balloon-tired trailers where the single herders and terra-formers set up their bunks. Everyone called it 'Bachelor's Row,' despite the fact that more than half of the scientists and technicians were women. Life on Aletha Three had its own rhythm. They travelled like high-tech nomads, never in one place long enough to call it home, always on the look for the next move. But hell or high water, wherever the camp stopped, the same tents would somehow always pop up next to each other.

Travis clipped a tent rope with his right foot and stumbled.

"Ouch!" Angry at himself for being so clumsy, he picked himself up and slipped past the main generator to the portable corrals on the very edge of the encampment. The horses looked up, startled to see someone so early in the day. They ran around the wide pen, heads high, tails streaming in the breeze. They were restless. Travis stood outside the gate a moment, a frayed halter in hand, and studied the animals. Over the years he had learned to read their moods, their behaviour as good a weather prediction as anything that came in from Base Camp five hundred kilometres to the south. The horses pranced, shoulders stiff as if they were stepping on broken glass instead of dirt and dry manure. No doubt about it, a storm was on its way.

The tall metal gate creaked on its hinges as Travis stepped inside the corral. Deuce saw him and spun away. Travis hazed him toward the long feed bunk. He stuck out his arm and pointed his finger at the horse's face.

"Whoa there, fella." The horse stopped, caught between Travis and the fence, nowhere left to run. He flinched a little as Travis looped the lead rope around his long neck, but stood patiently while he buckled the halter. 'How come you're so nervous today?"

Still moving quietly, Travis saddled the horse, then

slung aboard. The fenders creaked as he settled in, the slick leather seat as familiar as the taste of dust on a windy day. Deuce whickered over his shoulder at the other horses as Travis turned him away from camp.

"Come on, fella. You and me have a long ride ahead of us." He reached up and patted the horse's neck, then nudged him into a slow trot.

Red fire poured across the horizon as they headed west. Beta rose sluggishly into the dawn sky, a dull red hump half hidden by the jagged skyline. Deuce whickered and tossed his head, protesting the early start. Travis kicked him up faster, concentrating on the trail ahead and not the dark fear gnawing in his stomach. The higher they climbed, the more he began to doubt what he was doing. Memory of that scream rang in his mind, and the idea that he might be up against something he couldn't handle left him cold inside. A few klicks out of camp he stopped in the lee of a narrow ridge to let Deuce rest. He leaned out of the saddle and studied the ground.

Sharp rocks, flaked off the outcrops and boulders higher up the hill and washed down by the occasional storm, littered the path. A century and a half ago, Aletha had been dormant, a dead planet with a thin, unbreathable atmosphere. The seeder ships had changed that. Millions of tons of microbes and genetically modified plants had been released from

space, followed by the furnaces and refineries the terraformers needed to bring the rocky world to life. Now, it had air, and if there wasn't a lot of water, there was enough for more complex organisms to gain a foothold. Organisms like rabbits and crows, cattle, horses and human beings.

And who knew what else.

"Come on, Deuce, let's go."

Higher into the foothills they climbed. Jagged spires towered above them, the stone painted in garish shades of red and orange. Hundreds of metres above, tall black cliffs rimmed the narrow valley, as if the castles in the old fairytales Mom used to read to him when he was little had been torn out of the pages and dumped atop the alien landscape. Travis searched for familiar marks, hoping to find the spot where the tracks had been yesterday. But the further he climbed, the less certain he was that he was even in the same canyon where he had seen the strange markings.

The trail dipped into a ravine so narrow Deuce leapt across from one side to the other, loose rocks rolling in his wake. Travis clung tight to the saddle as the horse scrabbled up the other side, then turned him west again. They followed the ridge line to the top of a high, rock-strewn bench. Finally, something familiar popped into view, a small mound of horse manure, less than a day old.

"Never thought I'd be happy to see a pile of horse

apples," Travis muttered as he swung Deuce toward the little mound. The horse stuck his nose down and snorted, and broke into a slow trot as he tracked his own scent across the dry, open plateau.

Ahead, a jagged spine of lava poked upward, dark against the red cliffs behind it. A vein of bright green crystals lay embedded in the porous black stone. They glinted as if on fire as Alpha, the smaller, hotter sun, joined Beta in the pale sky. Travis remembered the outcrop, and turned toward it. Clumps of grass and scrub brush waved in the rising wind, proof that life could thrive in the harshest of places. Tracks wound from one patch to the next, broad tear-drop shaped imprints stamped in the dirt, the same hoof prints he had followed the day before. He back-tracked along them, anxious to find the three-toed tracks.

"They've got to be around here someplace." Travis reined Deuce in a little and forced him back to a walk so he could study the ground. The horse tossed his head as they meandered toward yet another steep-sided hill. He was nervous, and had Travis let him, would have turned and run for camp without so much as a nudge in the shoulder. He reached down and patted the animal's neck. "It's okay, fella. We've been up here before. Nothing out there but rocks."

Travis wondered if the horse knew it was being lied to. Something was definitely out there, somewhere.

The twin suns climbed higher, and soon the air grew hot. Travis reined Deuce in and stepped out of the saddle. It felt good to stretch his legs as he peeled off his jacket and tied it tightly behind the cantle. The tie straps snapped as he pulled them tight and double checked the knots. Mom would kill him if he lost another jacket. He checked that the digi-cam was still in his shirt pocket, then pulled his canteen out of the saddle bag. The water was lukewarm and tasted like plastic, but he swallowed it gratefully. Sunlight burned against his neck as he checked the cinch, then climbed back on. Deuce tried to turn around, but Travis swung him once more westward.

Time seemed to speed up as they crossed from ridge to ridge, the scattered tracks a confused path that crisscrossed back and forth at random. One minute he would find a clear trail, the next it would be gone, the ground too rocky to hold a print. Sweat poured down from under his hatband as the suns neared zenith, noon less than an hour away. Travis chewed on one of the ration bars he had brought along, his mouth so dry he could barely swallow the sticky-sweet granola. He took another swig from his canteen, and looked around, desperate to locate the strange tracks.

Everything looked familiar. He swore he had been past each boulder, ridden over every narrow, rocky ridge. It had seemed so simple when he left at daybreak: find the tracks, get some hard evidence, then collect the

bonus Tempke had hinted at last night. Now, in the hard light of day, the task suddenly felt impossible. Frustrated, Travis, pulled the reluctant horse around and started off once more.

They rounded a squat, rust-red boulder. Fresh tracks crept out from behind it. Travis's hope jumped, then sank again. The sharp prints were solid and half-moon shaped, with a tight band along the edge. Horse tracks.

"Great. Now we're following ourselves."

Dust whipped past, a gritty veil erasing any tracks that might have remained from the day before. Travis leaned on the saddle horn, head tucked down. It was hopeless. The chance had come and gone and he'd missed it. Part of him was relieved, the thought of those long-dead yearlings he had found four years ago all too fresh. "All right, Deuce. You win. Let's go home." Slowly, he gathered up the reins.

Behind them, just over the ridge, something screamed.

Buzz-saws cutting through bone. Demons howling in the night. The sound sent chills down Travis's neck. He hobbled the nervous horse, then climbed to the top of the steep hill, using his hands to pull himself over the crest. Nothing could have prepared him for what waited on the other side.

A young bull lay in a shallow, rocky bowl, his throat ripped open. Pieces of flesh littered the ground. Travis

stood on the ridge, swaying in the wind, stunned. His legs felt weak, the hair on the back of his neck standing high. It was just like before. Hand shaking, he snapped a quick picture, then checked the picture. The photo on the little screen was disappointing, the details washed out and flat. He flicked the setting to flash to compensate and took a second shot, the camera flash lightning bright. Satisfied the camera was working, he stumbled down the slope. The warm, wet smell of ammonia and sulphur and a thousand other scents rode the wind, strong enough to gag him. Travis searched the ground, taking pictures, cautiously looking around for more sign.

Something small and gleaming white caught his eye, a thumb-sized sickle buried in the bull's flank. He pried the broken tooth loose. It was sharp and smooth and wickedly curved. He stuffed it in his pocket, then searched the ground around the carcass. A set of three-toed tracks ran past his left boot.

They led behind him.

Travis bolted for the ridge. The killer hadn't left. It had circled him. He had to get back to Deuce, get mounted before it was too late and get home. No time to be brave, only time to run. Out of breath, he broke over the top of the hill and looked down.

A nightmare greeted him on the other side.

Chapter Three

Travis crested the spiny ridge, camera out and ready and looked down. He was terrified by what lay on the other side.

The thing was long and gray, a snake's head on a raptor's body and a whipcord tail that thrashed the air behind it. A narrow strip of feathery scales ran down its lean back and rippled as it moved. It crouched low, stalking the helpless horse, hissing and clicking its teeth. Blood stained its muzzle, a grim reminder of the dead bull on the other side of the steep hillside. Deuce reared, his front feet bound by the hobbles, unable to run. Circling upwind, the creature advanced.

"No!"

It whirled away from the horse and stared at Travis. Without thinking, Travis snapped a shot with the camera, the flash strobe still set to full. Startled by the light, the creature, howled in rage. Travis fired another shot then darted to the left, buying time. A hurried plan formed in his mind. Eyes on the creature, he fumbled with the camera timer, then placed it beside a small boulder.

"This is crazy," he whispered as he inched toward Deuce, moving from boulder to boulder while the creature edged closer. It sniffed the air, flicking its long tongue in and out between razor sharp teeth. Travis counted the seconds until the timer went off and tensed for a final dash to reach Deuce. Slowly, the animal advanced, head low, its powerful hind legs bunched to pounce. A bright flash caught it off-guard. Faster than Travis could have imagined, it lunged at the camera. A brittle, sickening crunch snapped loud above the wind as the creature snatched the digi-cam off the boulder and shattered it in its jaws. Bits of plastic and glass splayed around as it shook its head in defiance. Seeing his chance, Travis rushed toward Deuce.

The horse tried to bolt, but he grabbed the reins and held tight as he dropped to his knees and struggled to unfasten the hobbles.

"Please, Deuce, hold still!"

Precious seconds slipped away as Travis fumbled with the stiff buckle. Not twenty paces away, he heard the creature growl. He was so frightened he could barely breathe as he pulled the tongue out of the latch. The leather strap fell away just as the creature lunged toward them. Terrified, Deuce reared high, lashed out with his front feet and jerked away. Travis gasped in pain as the reins burned through his fist.

The horse slammed against him as he broke away and vanished down the slope. Off-balance, Travis tumbled backwards, utterly exposed. The creature saw him and spun around, neck low to the ground. It hissed at him and took a step forward. With no way to outrun the creature on foot, Travis scrabbled backwards, desperate to find cover. A pair of large boulders lay to his left, a narrow cleft between them just wide enough to crawl inside. He rolled between the boulders and pressed his body tight against the hard stone. Wishing the gap was deeper, he drew his knife and waited for the attack.

Rocks shifted outside as the creature advanced. Travis tensed and forced himself to breathe. Without warning, a long, gray snout shot toward him through the cleft. Travis swept the knife at it, hampered by the tight space. The blade drove hard into the dirt, the creature quicker than he expected. He pulled his hand back just as the thing made another attack.

"Get out of here!" Travis screamed. The blood-

stained muzzle poked toward his boot, and instinctively he jabbed at it again.

This time the bright utility blade struck home. Travis stabbed the knife into the bony snout and pulled back. A long, thin cut sliced across its slitted nostrils. The creature howled in rage. Its foul breath filled the tiny cleft, ammonia and the stench of rotting meat. Before Travis could pull his arm away, it lunged deeper inside the gap, thrashing and twisting, a wild blur of pure motion. The creature's snout struck Travis on the wrist and knocked the knife out of his hand. It struck the rock above him, then fell to the ground, out of reach. Unarmed, Travis scooted further against the boulders, trapped inside the cleft. Suddenly, his shelter had become a cage.

A loud crack cut past him.

Outside, a splatter of rocks and gravel kicked up beside the creature. The thing hissed as a second rifle shot pelted the ridge. A final scream and it leapt away, whipping its tail. Through the narrow gap, Travis watched it vanish over the ridge. Suddenly, he felt sick, too much adrenaline pouring through his blood. Shaking, he crawled out from between the boulders as his dad rode up, carbine in hand.

"Are you all right?"

Travis nodded and staggered to his feet. He swallowed, his mouth impossibly dry. "How did you find me?"